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At the crossroads of art-based action research

Jokela, Timo; Hiltunen, Mirja

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Timo Jokela & Mirja Hiltunen:

At the crossroads of art-based action research: Social justice and businesses

Introduction

This paper introduces applications of art-based action research (ABAR) methodology developed at the Faculty of Art and Design, University of Lapland (UoL), Finland. Art-based action research is an approach that aims to develop the participatory methods and working approaches of artist/teacher/researchers to seek art-based solutions to identified multidisciplinary challenges in collaboration with other stakeholders in environments and communities.

The need for ABAR was identified in multidisciplinary collaboration with UoL and the University of the Arctic's thematic network on Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design (ASAD, 2019). The challenges and opportunities of art education in the rapidly changing North and the Arctic have been discussed (Jokela & Coutts, 2018). These challenges are closely linked to cultural identities, which in turn are often constructed through art, visual culture and education. By furthering methods of participatory art education research, UoL researchers aim to create activities to renew and strengthen cultures according to the guidelines of sustainable development, including social justice and economic development.

The article introduces two cases in which the ABAR method has been used in two different contexts in Northern Finland. The first case, *Art Gear – a bi-directional integration supporting young people*, is a project based on collaboration between social work, art education disciplines and local artist associations, with the aim to promote social justice and wellbeing. The second case, *Environmental Art for Tourism (EAT)*, is a project based on collaboration with tourist entrepreneurs, artists and environment planning, with the aim to develop new sustainable models to create aesthetic environments and art-based services.

With the aid of these examples, the article explains the current use of ABAR methodology in art education and applied visual art. We argue that ABAR provides a space to form unique joint-created narratives, services and products in the changing societal circumstances in the North. Art-based action research can increase cultural and ethnic diversity, social justice and new innovative and sustainable livelihoods in the touristic context.

Art-based action research

Art-based action research is not a single method, but rather a research strategy that guides the progress of research in the cycles of action research by using art-based methods. It is clearly linked with International Art-based Research (Leavy, 2017) Art-based Educational Research (Sinner, Irwin & Jokela, 2018), Artistic Research (Borgdorff, 2011) and A/r/tography (Irwin and Cosson, 2004). To clarify the difference between artistic research and art-based research methods, and to highlight the role of action research, it has been termed ABAR (Jokela, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015). It has been used in art education reform (Hiltunen, 2009), participatory art activities (Jokela, 2019; Härkönen, Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2018), development work in the social sector (Hiltunen, 2010; Hiltunen et al., 2018) and the cultural tourism industry (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2019).

Even when all the developers of ABAR at UoL worked as artists, the key goal in developing the ABAR method was not to incorporate the artist/teacher/researcher's own artistic expression or self-reflection. Rather, they highlighted the interaction and teamwork-building capacity with other cooperating teachers, artists, researchers, communities and participants, which is typical in educational action research, community-based action research (Stringer, 2008) and participatory action research (Whyte, 1991). Among art education researchers at UoL, art-based research is understood as qualitative research and not as its own paradigm, as Leavy (2017), for example, has suggested.

The research and development projects coordinated by Department of Art Education staff are normally funded by external bodies, and the ABAR method provides a good basis for the goal of collaborative development and presenting the results to stakeholders and different audiences, and for reporting the results to funding bodies. Representatives of the education sector, art and cultural institutions, the social sector, tourism and business sectors and, naturally, local communities are often involved in these research and development projects.

Art Gear

The *Art Gear* project was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and conducted in collaboration with art education and social work disciplines, the Artists' Association of Lapland and the Cross-art Collective Piste. The project focused on the challenges of increased immigration in Finnish Lapland, with the broader objective to promote social

justice by supporting the bi-directional social integration and inclusion of young people and strengthening youth empowerment, agency and cohesion in a diversifying society (Hiltunen et al., 2018; Manifold et al., 2016; Määttä, 2017).

The number of refugees and asylum seekers increased abruptly in Europe in 2015, and immigration also increased in Northern Finland (Nykänen et al., 2018). Bi-directional integration in this project refers to equalising access to cultural activities in which both locals and immigrants are supported in their integration into the new multi- and intercultural situation in the North. We aimed to create spaces for new encounters and to address harmful social divisions and the radicalisation of youth through arts-based action.

As part of the project, 109 workshops were organised involving over 260 people of diverse cultural, ethnic, national and religious backgrounds. The environment played an important role in terms of actualising participation. Workshop locations were chosen through careful reflection on the aims set in a shared process with artists, researchers, students and participants. The public space as a scene for art-based action increased inclusion in an open, real-life context, which can build self-esteem and familiarise youth with the local environment.

During the two-year period, participants told a wide range of stories of their integration. There is no single correct model of ‘successful’ integration; instead, it is a lively process consisting of many types of dialogues. Art-based action research offered ways to bring out different meanings and emotions and to create a space to be seen and heard differently. This is increasingly important in a transnational world in which various problems and crises require encounters and cooperation with different types of groups of people and cultures on their terms.

Environmental Art for Tourism sites in Lapland

A large-scale development project, *Environmental Art for Tourism (EAT)* is an example of collaboration with continuing education for artists, regional development and businesses. It was funded by ESF and Lapland Council, and conducted in collaboration between the Faculty of Art and Design, the Art Association of Lapland and four companies operating in the tourism industry (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2019). In the Arctic region, the tourism sector is a growing and employing economy, which is replacing the economy based on the utilisation of

the natural resource industry. The cooperation between the tourism industry and the creative sector is expected to provide jobs and methods of earning for artists. The project aims to increase the use of environmental art by tourism companies in Northern Finland and to support new collaborative skills among artists working in such environments who are contributing to the development of responsible and sustainable tourism in the Arctic environment (see Rantala et al., 2019). In this project, ABAR has been used with the aim of developing models of collaboration between artists and companies. Artists, art-education students, representatives of tourism companies and experts from the university formed design teams to determine needs and plan art for tourism sites. The research involved four tourism companies and sites, and the aim at all the sites was to support summer tourism in particular. For example, the identified design needs included landscaping the sites, developing story-based art paths, designing thematic sites to experience Northern cultural heritage and developing art-based services for a sculpture park.

Various art-based methods lead to the different place-specificities of art. Practical results show how place-specific artwork can bring out local cultural heritage and reform the cultures of the Arctic region in a sustainable manner. According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela (2019), the results of ABAR have led to a new understanding of artists' skills utilised in creating novel forms of environmental art as part of the design and architecture of tourism sites. These experiences are significant in the Arctic region, where the evolution of livelihoods has increasingly shown the importance of nature tourism and creative industries in boosting employment. Artists have a growing number of opportunities to use their skills and earn their living in the design of tourism environments.

Conclusion

The fulfilment of both social- and business-orientated research projects demonstrates that ABAR enables the researcher to distinguish art-based development work from other disciplines and other collaborators who are not familiar with art. The ABAR approach succeeds in improving development methods and approaches, and art realised using pedagogical, dialogical and community-based methods of relational contemporary art evokes emotions and directly affects participants. The ABAR method as a combination of art and action research makes new solutions visible, evident and emotionally easy to absorb in practice. Researchers learn how to develop new knowledge and practices ethically and directly related to their research activities in the real world. In addition, ABAR projects have

been characterised by bringing together people of different ages and generations, and by understanding, conveying and renewing the significance of the cultures of Northern places and communities through art.

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